

Let's Talk About Trauma

What is "trauma"?

The term **trauma** describes a deeply distressing event and its effects on the individual who experienced it.

Not every difficult experience is "traumatic," but when an event or series of events is so frightening, intense, or violent that a person's brain is unable to process it or cope as usual, we refer to this as a **traumatic event**.

Examples of traumatic events

- Physical abuse or neglect
- Sexual or domestic violence
- Food or housing insecurity
- School or community violence
- Refugee or immigration experiences
- Loss of a loved one (death or absence)

Traumatic events can take many different forms, but all relate in seriously threatening or causing harm to a person's physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing.

Sadly, trauma affects the lives of many students, so it is critical that educators learn how to identify and respond to the signs of traumatic stress in schools.



More than 2/3 of U.S. youth report experiencing at least 1 traumatic event by age 16.



Signs of traumatic stress

Every trauma experience and response is unique, but research points to a few common signs for different age groups.

Pre-K through elementary

- Difficulty remaining focused
- Clinginess or separation anxiety
- Trouble managing emotions
- Disproportionate reactions to changes, challenges, or setbacks

Middle and high school

- Apathy or disengagement
- Substance experimentation
- Disordered eating or self-harm
- Physical and/or verbal aggression

College and young adults

- Feelings of anxiety or depression
- Decline or noticeable changes in personal hygiene and self care
- Engagement in high-risk behaviors

Signs of trauma in our schools

In addition to impacting students' physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing, trauma can also create real barriers to learning. Research shows that, on average, students who witness or survive trauma experience:

- Lower grades and attendance
- Greater need for differentiated learning
- Higher rates of suspension and expulsion
- Increased risk for nearly all behavioral health and substance abuse disorders
- Increased involvement with the child welfare and juvenile justice systems



Trauma-Informed Education

What is "trauma-informed" education?

"Trauma-informed" education refers to teaching practices and school policies that:



Recognize the fact that many students experience trauma.



Consider the ways that trauma can impact student learning and behavior.



Help all students to build resilience and social emotional learning.

Learn how the Minnesota Institute for Trauma-Informed Education (MITIE) is supporting and advancing this critical work by visiting <https://link.stthomas.edu/mitie>.

Strategies to support students

Educators, school staff, parents, and caregivers who are equipped with a basic understanding of trauma and the tools to respond to trauma signs can help students of all ages to:

- Identify and articulate their emotions
- Learn what triggers their stress responses
- Practice deep breathing and other techniques for emotional self-regulation
- Know when and how to ask for help

Structures to support schools

Administrators who have invested in trauma-informed education training and resources report that their schools have been able to:

- Build students' social emotional learning
- Lower barriers to learning and engagement
- Reduce disruptions and interventions
- Create a safer school environment for all
- Better equip and empower educators